

Wyn Wachhorst. *Thomas Alva Edison: An American Myth.* 328 pp., illus., apps., bibl., index. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981. \$15.

Wyn Wachhorst appraises his readers that this book is not a biography. It is not, and it should perhaps be read in conjunction with Matthew Josephson's or Robert Conot's biography of Edison. Wachhorst's book is an analysis of the myth of Thomas Alva Edison and its role in American culture. For this study the author has examined an impressive quantity of sources (totaling some 4,724 items) and has supplemented the text with a bibliometric appendix analyzing the distribution and content of the Edison literature. Wachhorst brings diverse, provocative insights to his study of Edison. He also relies heavily on the metaphor of the machine in the garden developed by Leo Marx.

Wachhorst finds in the story of Edison's boyhood and youth several favorite American cultural stereotypes. Young Tom Edison, who sold newspapers and snacks on the train, printed his own weekly newspaper, and conducted chemistry experiments in the baggage car in his spare time until he set the car on fire, resembles Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and perhaps no one so much as the typical self-sufficient Horatio Alger hero. Like an Alger hero, young Edison snatched a stationmaster's child from the path of a rolling boxcar and was rewarded by the stationmaster with a course of instruction in telegraphy. During the 1860s Edison worked as an itinerant telegraph operator before settling in the New York-Newark area, where he established himself as an inventor of telegraph apparatus. In 1876 he built a laboratory at Menlo Park, New Jersey, and with the invention of the phono-

graph in 1877, Thomas Edison, the Wizard of Menlo Park, entered the pantheon of American mythology.

During Edison's lifetime the western frontier vanished and America changed from a rural, small-town society to an urban, industrial nation. American technology was transformed by the shift from steam to electric power and the converging influence of science, changes which Wachhorst relates to Lewis Mumford's distinction between "paleotechnic" and "neotechnic" phases of technology. Edison, the inventor of the electric lighting and power distribution system, was largely responsible for this technological shift. But Wachhorst quite convincingly argues that it was Edison's phonograph, rather than the electric light, that first awakened the public to the potential of subtly automated machines. "The conviction arose, after Edison launched the neotechnic century, that the fallen American Adam, having lost the garden in the age of steam, would now reenter Paradise astride the machine" (p. 206). Edison became the prophet and living symbol of the new technology. But as accounts of Edison's inventions appeared in the press, it was necessary to emphasize at the same time Edison's homely, small-town origins in order to offset the darker implications of the Faustian wizard image; to root the machine, or at least its creator, in the garden of the Midwest; to balance power with innocence.

The major components of the Edison myth were developed in early biographical accounts during the decade following the invention of the phonograph. Beginning in the 1890s, Edison's image began to undergo a gradual shift from "great inventor" to "great American" as Edison began to talk more and invent less. Edison had been an "idol of production," known for what he did; during the twentieth century he became an "idol of consumption," known for his "well-knownness." As technology became more pervasive, Edison, its symbol and spokesman, was increasingly associated with qualities that were the antithesis of technology's more disconcerting implications: the press publicized Edison's back-to-nature camping trips, his thoughts on immortality, and his self-confident, unreconstructed individualism. Wachhorst's book explores the interrelationship between the evolving Edison myth and the changing perceptions of an increasingly technologically dependent American culture.

Wyn Wachhorst brings new perspectives and insights to the study of Edison. The first portion of the book, which identifies the major components of the Edison myth and the cultural context in which they are set, seemed to me to be more successful than the subsequent chapters that deal with the gradual evolution of Edison's image. The concluding chapter does not quite pull together the many suggestive considerations set forth in the introduction. It seemed to me, too, that Wachhorst's heavy use of metaphorical language at times obscures rather than clarifies his analysis. These comments should be qualified, however, by the statement that this brief review cannot do justice to Wachhorst's detailing of the subtleties and kaleidoscopic shifts in the Edison myth. Wachhorst has produced a perceptive study of the relationship between a culture's values and needs and its heroes. Because it tells us as much about American culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries as about Thomas Edison, this book should be of interest to a much wider audience than historians of science and technology.

SUSAN SCHULTZ